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## Communication Infrastructure Theory: A Rural Application

Callie S. Embry  
*University of Arkansas, Fayetteville*

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Communication Infrastructure Theory:  
A Rural Application

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Communication

by

Callie S. Embry  
University of Arizona  
Bachelor of Science in Business Administration, 1989

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University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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Matthew L. Spialek, Ph.D.  
Thesis Advisor

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Myria W. Allen, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

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Patricia Amason, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

## **Abstract**

The health of a community's communication infrastructure influences their efficacy and efficiency in dealing with societal problems. The majority of previous communication infrastructure research has focused on multicultural urban centers. This study looks at the communication infrastructure of one rural Arkansas town, specifically looking for the places residents report as communication assets and the subjects discussed within the storytelling network. I used a combination of communication asset mapping and semi-structured interviews to identify the physical locations within the community where residents regularly converse with one another. The interviews along with observations also provided insight into the subject matter that residents prioritize when conversing in public. I found that the overwhelming majority of public locations, whether public spaces or private businesses, were considered comfort zones by respondents. I also discovered that residents prefer to talk about micro-level subjects such as family, relationships, and well-being and avoid meso- and macro-level topics that could be considered controversial, such as local or national politics, except when the issue brought up for discussion impacted the community's youth.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Much of the current scholarship surrounding communication infrastructure theory has emphasized the impact of communication infrastructure on things like the normative influence that urban neighborhoods have on health care (Zhao Martin, Murphy, Ball-Rokeach, Frank & Moran, 2018), engaging community members in the regentrification of their neighborhood (Villanueva, Gonzalez, Son, Moreno, Liu & Ball-Rokeach, 2017) and the effects of communication networks on minority health behaviors in urban communities (Wilkin, Katz, Ball-Rokeach & Hether, 2015), which has left a gap in empirical research with regard to communication infrastructure theory as it relates to smaller, rural communities. These days more than 90 percent of the U. S. population lives in urban and suburban neighborhoods (Wuthnow, 2014) so it is no surprise that researchers focus on this segment of the population.

However, there was a time when only 20 percent of the population lived in cities and nearly everyone had to devote their time to agricultural pursuits (Wuthnow, 2014). The declining population of rural areas means declining resources in those areas. A declining population reduces the labor force, which in turn negatively affects economic activity. It lessens a rural community's political power, decreasing representation at both the state and federal level (The Character of Rural America, 2011). A declining tax base also means fewer financial resources available to support public utilities like water and electricity, public services like fire and police protection and public education.

Communication is essential in addressing the resource disparities in rural communities. Rural citizens must create, access and exchange information via their communication networks in order to work together to improve their communities and maintain their current way of life. Ultimately, healthy communication networks are necessary for maintaining social and economic

stability, and community organizers have often mapped communication networks as a first step in developing programs and interventions to assist communities. Much like asset mapping, which identifies a community's strengths, skills and under-utilized resources in order to build community capacity (Robinson, 2003); mapping communication networks identifies those locations in a community that are critical to information dissemination and those individuals or groups of individuals who frequent those locations. The geographic locations that are identified in the mapping process are called communication assets.

Communication infrastructure theory addresses these communication networks that are made up of interpersonal, organizational and mediated connections and asserts that through these connections communities and community members can build upon their knowledge base in order to achieve their goals (Ball-Rokeach, Kim & Matei, 2001). Understanding these communication networks has been useful in many ways; building belonging in racially diverse environments (Ball-Rokeach, et al., 2001), improving the dissemination of health care information (Villanueva, Broad, Gonzalez, Ball-Rokeach & Murphy, 2016), increasing disaster preparedness (Kim & Kang, 2010); fostering community resilience perceptions (Spialek & Houston, 2018), and improving civic engagement (Kim, Jung & Ball-Rokeach, 2006). With the exception of a few studies (see Spialek & Houston, 2018) most of this research has been done in urban (Los Angeles) communities.

In each of the aforementioned studies, communication infrastructure played a vital role in enabling underserved and underrepresented urban communities to increase their developmental capacity. Inner city neighborhoods that have historically dealt with poverty, homelessness, high crime rates, and many other social issues that tend to follow marginalized populations have benefited from understanding and utilizing their communication networks. However, this theory

has not been tested in a rural environment, which, when compared with urban neighborhoods looks different in a physical sense as well as in a demographic sense. Kim, Jung and Ball-Rokeach (2006) studied Anglo, African American, Latino, and Asian neighborhoods where neighbors shared walls and met each other in the streets outside their residences. Rural neighborhoods, conversely, look much more homogenous and can consist of ‘neighbors’ who live miles apart as opposed to next door. The sociocultural geography of a community is a critical factor that constrains or facilitates neighborhood storytelling (Kim, Jung & Ball-Rokeach, 2006). Therefore, storytelling networks in rural areas may look very different than they do in urban neighborhoods due to the differences in sociocultural geography. Rural communities have their own set of social issues and geographical barriers; like lack of transportation, isolation, persistent poverty, and reduced access to health care; that may slow down or even impede communicative efforts intended to build and improve communities (Johnston, 2017; Wuthnow, 2014). This thesis will extend communication infrastructure theory by using communication asset mapping, observations and semi-structured interviews to analyze the communication infrastructure of one rural community in Northwest Arkansas, Huntsville.

I will begin my analysis of existing research with a discussion of communication asset mapping and its usefulness in understanding a community’s storytelling network, a vital component of any communication infrastructure. Then I will address communication infrastructure theory. Finally, I will conclude by defining characteristics specific to rural communities that differentiate them from the urban communities focused on in previous studies.

## Chapter 2

### Review of Literature

#### Communication Asset Mapping

To better and more effectively compete in today's economy communities need to highlight and accentuate their distinct attributes (Brennan, Bridger & Alter; 2013). But before they can highlight those attributes, they must first gain an understanding of what those assets, capacities and abilities are. Individuals and organizations in even the poorest communities represent resources that can be used to the community's benefit (McKnight, 1998). This is not to suggest that poor communities can affect change solely using their own resources, they may still need outside help, however it is imperative that they have local control and investment in the process if it is to be successful (McKnight, 1998). Asset mapping identifies and records the abilities, capabilities and capacities, possessed by a community and individual community members; which can then be utilized by local government agencies and not for profits to increase a community's economic and cultural capacity (Brennan, Bridger & Alter; 2013). The process focuses on the positive, helping communities to uncover hidden strengths, skills and underutilized resources to maximize its potential (Robinson, 2003).

Assets could include individuals and their specific skill sets, community characteristics, associations, institutions, businesses and natural or physical resources. Although asset mapping does not build capacity it does increase the available capacity of the community (Robinson, 2003). Asset mapping can be used to target specific problems or concerns in a community as well. Youth could be asked to map assets available for teens. Not only would this give a more representative view of the assets available for teens, but it would also cultivate a more positive perception of what the community had to offer (Nam, 2014). Identifying the communication

networks that aid in constructing the identity, values, and code of behavior of community members (Proctor, 2004) can increase the available capacity of the community as well.

Communication asset mapping (CAM) is an approach that combines communication infrastructure theory with asset-oriented community field mapping (Villanueva, Broad, Gonzalez, Ball-Rokeach & Murphy, 2016). CAM highlights positive spaces of communicative interaction in communities through street-level mapping. These spaces are called communication assets and can be used by community practitioners to design message dissemination strategies. CAM is considered an ecological approach in that it emphasizes the environmental context of behavior while incorporating social and psychological influences (Villanueva, et al, 2016). Communication asset maps identify communication comfort zones and hot spots. Comfort zones are geographic locations within the community with which residents feel a connection, like their church or their place of employment. Hot spots are the places where residents tend to spontaneously strike up conversations with one another (Wilkin, Stringer, O'Quin, Montgomery & Hunt, 2011). Hot spots can be anywhere, at the park, the grocery store or a mailbox. Comfort zones and hot spots are not mutually exclusive; a place can be both a comfort zone and a hot spot.

Creating communication asset maps reinforces the notion that the storytelling network is part of the communication environment of the community. It helps participants better understand what communication assets actually exist and how they may be used to address community problems. It can also give a useful outline of the local social power structure and identify key developers of the community story (Villanueva, et al., 2016).

Communication comfort zones represent place identity, which refers to feelings and connections individuals have to a place they use to define who they are; as well as place

dependence, the functional connection to a setting to support communication (Raymond, Brown & Weber, 2010). Rural residents often develop strong attachments to both the physical and social characteristics of place which are often enhanced by ancestral and cultural connections (Raymond, Brown & Weber, 2010). Rural residents talk about place as one of the most significant aspects of their communities. The familiarity of the place is what is most appealing and makes a place a comfort zone (Wuthnow, 2014). The emotional connections based on shared history, interest or concerns create social connections and feelings of belongingness that become connected to place (Raymond, Brown & Weber, 2010). The individual connection to place is not just based on experience or social interaction, it is an identity formed through residential and farming history (Raymond, Brown & Weber, 2010).

Social networks also provide a foundation for community attachment (Raymond, Brown, & Weber, 2010). People engage in social relationships with others daily building their social identity based on this social interaction. (Proctor, 2004). The more people are connected to social networks and the more they engage in social relationships the greater their feeling of belonging. This happens in two ways, first the connections themselves create belongingness but also the increase in knowledge of neighborhood events and concerns also increases belongingness (Ball-Rokeach, Kim & Matei, 2001). Given the geographical, cultural and socioeconomic features of rural communities, I ask the following:

RQ1: What locations do rural residents identify as communication assets in the rural community of Huntsville, AR?

### **A Communication Infrastructure Perspective**

Communication infrastructure theory posits that storytelling is central to the process of building and maintaining a community as well as effecting social change at the community level

(Ball-Rokeach, et. al., 2001). It is through these shared stories that individuals create a connection to their community (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006b) and relay messages, experiences and knowledge to other individuals, their communities and society at large (East, Jackson, O'Brien & Peters, 2010).

Humans tell stories all the time. It is as integral to our existence as breathing and eating; all our interpersonal interactions contain some form of storytelling (Holderman & Crockett, 2014). People tend to think of their lives as a series of stories and share their lives with others through those stories (East, Jackson, O'Brien & Peters, 2010). The process of storytelling offers us the opportunity to reflect on and reevaluate our lived experiences (Berkowitz, 2011) helping us develop meaning and create our identity. We define ourselves by the stories we tell (Papachristophorou, 2014) and by emphasizing or diminishing parts of the story we can shape the way we are perceived by others (East, Jackson, O'Brien & Peters, 2010). The stories we share can also benefit the listeners by giving them the opportunity to learn from our experiences (East, Jackson, O'Brien & Peters, 2010).

There are two basic components of any communication infrastructure; a multilevel storytelling system which is set in a communication action context (Ball-Rokeach, Kim & Matei, 2001). The communication action context is any constructed or social piece of the environment that either encourages people to engage with others in communication or discourages interpersonal communication. An open context occurs when interpersonal communication is encouraged, and a closed context occurs when interpersonal communication is discouraged. (Ball-Rokeach, et. al., 2001). According to Ball-Rokeach, et al. (2001) this context has multiple psychological, sociocultural, economic and technological features that enable or constrain an individual's communication behavior. A psychological feature that could create a closed context

by discouraging someone from engaging in conversation would be fear. Someone who is new to a group and fearful of rejection will be less likely to engage others in conversation. Conversely, comfort could create an open communication action context. Someone who knows several people in the group already and feels comfortable will be more likely to engage in conversation. Sociocultural features, like ethnicity, class and cultural similarity can create closed or open communication contexts. Economic features like time and resources available can create a closed communication action context when they are limited, and someone is too busy or lacks the resources to engage in interpersonal communication. And technological features like access to communication technologies and availability of transportation can also create open or closed communication contexts.

Fisher (1989) conceptualizes that humans are natural storytellers and that our daily communication offers narratives that shape our understanding of the world around us. These stories make up the communication infrastructure's storytelling system, which can also be called a storytelling network and consists of three tiers or levels of storytelling communication assets. Macro-level communication assets are the media, government, organized religions, and other central institutions or large organizations that have storytelling production and dissemination resources. Meso-level communication assets are smaller and more locally based organizations whose primary goals are concerned with a specific residential area or community like public school districts, or local newspapers. And the micro-level communication assets are interpersonal networks; individuals communicating with each other in a one-to-one, or small group manner. These levels are not just different in size but also in terms of their primary storytelling referent and their imagined audience. Macro-level agents tell stories about the entire region, nation and world and the imagined audience is broadly conceived as the entire county or

region. The stories of meso-level agents focus on a specific community, with the residents of that community as their audience. Micro-level agents' storytelling may include subjects far from their community that concern the region or nation but their audience is singular in nature (Ball-Rokeach, et. al., 2001).

These communication agents do not act independently from one another; they are involved in a dynamic network of conversations that form the communicative foundation and identity of the community (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006). Individuals who belong to social organizations participate in a reciprocal defining process, where members conform to the norms of the group and the group conforms to its members (Korte, 2007). Individual members perceptions and actions conform to the group norms the more they define themselves as part of the group (Stets & Burke, 2000). As members become more involved in the group their stories become more intertwined and their personal discourse and the group discourse become more parallel. The impact this network has can be seen most powerfully when all three levels of agents are focused on the same issue or story (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006).

Stories are influenced by the environment, social conditions, changing perspectives, the audience, and the reason for relating the story (East, Jackson, O'Brien & Peters, 2010). The stories that are told at the higher (macro- and meso-) levels can have a great impact on the stories that are shared at the lower levels. Negative macro-level community stories constrain the stories at the meso- and micro-level (Ball-Rokeach, et. al., 2001) giving those communities a distinct disadvantage to communities that benefit from positive macro-level stories. Conversely, it is difficult for stories at the meso- and micro-level to influence macro-level stories. However, storytelling between the meso- and micro-levels is fluid, each can have a huge impact on the other (Ball-Rokeach, et. al., 2001). Influence between meso- and micro-level communication

agents is fluid as well. The more an individual is connected to meso-level communication agents the more influence they have over those agents and the more influence those agents have over the individual's communicative behavior (Ball-Rokeach, et. al., 2001).

People are social animals who use communication in all its many forms and levels to create a world where they feel connected and are no longer just an "I" but become part of the "we" (Ball-Rokeach, et al, 2001). Joining meso-level communication agents, like community groups or organizations, increases an individual's sense of belonging, pride, meaning and stability in their community (Korte, 2007). Individuals can be members of more than one organization at a time and can become members of multiple organizations throughout their lifetime. In this way they are able to embed themselves into the community narrative at many levels (Stets & Burke, 2000). As a member, individuals not only become connected to the group as a whole but make personal connections as well; thus, they affect the group's story and the stories of all the other individuals in the group (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006b). Even though individuals build their own sense of community by joining groups, communities are more than the organizations or groups that exist within them. Given the range of stories that can be shared across ecological levels, I ask the following:

RQ2: What are the kinds of stories residents share at different communication assets throughout the rural community of Huntsville, Arkansas?

### **Defining a Rural Community**

Community can be defined using five core elements; location, sharing, joint action, social ties, and diversity (MacQueen, McLellan, Metzger, Kegeles, Scotti, Stauss, Blanchard, & Trotter II, 2001). Location, which is defining community by where one lives, is the most common descriptor. However, when defining community by place it is possible for someone to physically

live in a community without being involved in the community. When a community is defined by sharing it is in reference to the sharing of interests, beliefs, values or perspectives; like a church community. A community defined by joint action is one that is brought together by a specific activity; like work or volunteering. Members of a joint action community may not interact with each other anywhere but while participating in their joint action. Communities based on social ties have less to do with actions and beliefs and more to do with connections. These communities consist of families, support groups, roommates, and friends. The diversity element of community is the only element to deal with exclusion rather than inclusion. Diversity communities are created when there is a group that is different from the average, this can be in relation to race or ethnicity but can also be groups that are stigmatized or stereotyped in other ways as well, like socio-economic status or education (MacQueen, et. al, 2001).

Nearly every federal agency defines rural communities in a different way; most often defining them by exclusion. The US Census Bureau defines rural communities as “all population housing, and territory not included within an urban area” (Johnston, 2017, p. 282). The Office of Management and Budget defines metropolitan counties as having a population over 50,000, therefore rural counties must have a population of less than 50,000. The USDA also uses exclusionary terminology when defining rural communities as any open country, or town which is not part of an urban center and has a population of less than 20,000 with a lack of mortgage credit (Johnston, 2017). Although rural areas cover approximately 97 percent of the nation’s land area; they only contain 19.3 percent of the population (New Census Data, 2016).

Aside from population, one of the biggest defining factors of rural communities is their economic base. The rural economy is in large part dependent on traditional goods-producing industries such as manufacturing and agriculture (Beaulieu, 1990; Johnston, 2017). The median

income in rural areas is significantly below that of urban communities (Johnston,2017). And although the cost of living in rural communities is generally lower than in urban areas, rural families have a higher poverty rate, which has been a persistent problem (Johnston, 2017).

Rural communities are faced with huge disparities in resources when compared to their urban neighbors. The population in rural areas has consistently declined since the 1970's (Johnston, 2017; Wuthnow, 2014). The smaller tax base of rural communities means limited governmental resources at all levels. Education for rural children is often substandard. Transportation is problematic due to the distance necessary to travel and the limited resources spent on infrastructure. Television and internet services are often satellite based if available at all. Even basic services like water and electricity are difficult to obtain in some locations. Public community spaces like parks and libraries are limited and generally minimally managed. There is limited access to health and dental care. Due to the nature of work available in rural areas, wages are below average, and jobs are less likely to offer benefits (Nadel & Sagawa, 2002).

Rural residents are more likely to be home owners, but nearly one out of every 10 of those homes is considered “substandard,” which means there is inadequate or no heat, no or inconsistent electricity, a lack of complete plumbing, exposed wiring and ongoing maintenance and upkeep issues (Johnston, 2017). Homes in rural agricultural “communities” are often spread out with “neighbors” living miles apart. Access to homes is limited, and easily affected by the weather and road conditions.

Rural neighborhoods have a limited number of private and public spaces that can serve as key social or community building sites (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006) and even fewer that are specifically designed to foster community building. Even though place and opportunity are important to building community, community is ultimately a social construct grounded in

communication (Procter, 2004). Thus, understanding the communicative behaviors of neighborhood residents leads to a better understanding of their community and enables the development of a more efficient process for building community.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Research Method**

Due to the communicative and experiential nature of the research questions a combination of qualitative data collection methods was chosen as the most appropriate approach for acquiring the necessary data to fulfill this study. In the following section I first define the research sample, followed by an explanation of the various qualitative data collection methods that were employed, and conclude with a discussion of how the data was analyzed.

#### **Focal Community**

Huntsville, Arkansas is located in the northwest corner of Arkansas approximately 28 miles east of Fayetteville (Distance, 2019). It is the county seat of Madison county and has the only medical facilities in the county. Nearly all the county's youth attend school in Huntsville. It is a predominantly agricultural community which relies heavily on the poultry industry. As with most rural communities the public-school system is the largest employer, followed by Tyson Foods, which has a turkey processing plant within city limits, and Ducommom, a tech manufacturer (Haden & Russell, 2017). There is a weekly local newspaper and a community television station run by the local cable company that airs high school sports, talent shows, pageants, etc. City residents have access to the local cable service, however anyone outside of city limits must rely on satellite providers for their television service and satellite or line of site providers for internet services. A large portion of county residents are unable to have at-home internet access due to their financial situation or their physical location. The major television networks are received from affiliates that lie outside of the county. Huntsville has a population of 2,418; which is predominately white (78.4%), and Hispanic (18.3%; Neighborhood Scout, 2018). While nearly 75% of the population has a high school diploma; just under 8% have a college or

advanced degree. The median household income is \$27,953 and 30.7% of Huntsville residents fall below the poverty level (Neighborhood Scout, 2018). Seventy-five percent of Madison county residents are homeowners, 91.6% of whom have been in the same home for more than one year (U.S. Census, 2018).

### **Sample**

The sample for this study consisted of 20 residents living in the rural Arkansas community of Huntsville. Participants ranged in age from 19 years old to approximately 85 and their residential tenure ranged from as little as 9 years to their entire lives. Three respondents were male and 17 were female. Nineteen respondents were Caucasian and one was Hispanic. All respondents reported Huntsville as being ‘their’ community however only nine of them live within the city limits; the others reported living as far away as 15 miles out of town. To ensure the data reflected a true representation of the community I purposefully chose a variety of interview participants from the potential sample. It was important to have participants that ranged in age, socioeconomic status, residential tenure, gender, and marital status to obtain an accurate picture of the community’s communication infrastructure. All participants were given pseudonyms to preserve their anonymity (see Table 1).

### **Data Collection**

Data collection consisted of a three-pronged approach. First, to discover what, if any, communication assets exist in Huntsville, I conducted communication asset mapping (McKnight, 1998); meaning, I canvassed high traffic geographic locations in Huntsville gathering observational data at those locations with the intent of identifying specific buildings or areas that act as communication assets. I noted where, when and who was participating in the community’s storytelling network and when possible, I noted the subject matter of the stories that were being

shared. Then, individual businesses, locations or events, such as restaurants, churches and sporting events, where interpersonal communication was expected to occur were also observed, selected by what could be considered a criterion-based method (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Finally, I concluded by conducting one-on-one semi-structured interviews, initially with participants who were observed at the communication assets identified during the mapping and observation processes, and then through snowball sampling techniques (Keyton, 2015) to gain further insight into why these specific locations are communication assets, what other locations may be considered communication assets, and what stories were being shared at these identified locations. Snowball sampling involves asking initial interview participants to suggest someone else who would be a good candidate for the study based on what they learned from the interview process (Keyton, 2015).

I began by determining which geographical areas should be mapped regarding communication assets in Huntsville. I focused on high traffic areas; downtown, the shopping center, and the senior center which is near the public library and the local walking trail. I then adapted city maps to create field instruments that represented the target geographic locations. The field instruments were marked with potential communication asset categories (e.g., public space, business, community organization, public service, medical/health facilities, church, and culture/arts resources) which have been identified from previous studies (Villanueva, et. al., 2016). The field instruments included space to record the communication asset's address, category, date and time of observation as well as space to record emergent categories if assets were identified that did not fall into the predetermined categories, like a bus stop or parking lot. Please see appendix A for an example of the field instrument.

I began the mapping process in downtown Huntsville. Sitting in a gazebo in the middle of the downtown square I could view a majority of the downtown businesses as well as the park area that the gazebo was located in. I noted where, when and who was participating in the community's storytelling network and when possible, I noted the subject matter of the stories that were being shared. However, I quickly became aware that mapping as laid out by Villanueva and colleagues (2016) would not be as productive as hoped. The research was conducted in early spring and Huntsville residents did not spend much time in the open downtown area, so while I was able to observe what stores or locations residents went into, I was only able to observe a few interpersonal interactions and none that produced storytelling data. I did notice that at one business in particular where customers could have easily walked in, completed their transaction and then walk out, they instead were spending quite a bit of time before leaving. So, I decided to ask the person behind the counter, who happened to be the owner, to be my first interview participant. Please see appendix B for the informed consent form and appendix C for the interview guide.

Due to time constraints mapping and observations took place over a three-week period (see Appendix D, Table 2 for observation locations and times). After the first mapping session, observations became the dominant method of initial data collection. I took in-depth written observational notes when and where appropriate. If note taking would have been considered too intrusive at the time of the observation I would immediately, upon reaching my car, note as much information as I could remember and then write up the observations in more depth once I returned to my office. My focus was that of research observer (Keyton, 2015); however, I interacted with participants casually and occasionally when the need arose. Some of the subjects who were observed engaging in interpersonal communication were approached on site and asked

to be interviewed as research participants. This practice resulted in four initial interviews which were scheduled for a later date, to allow for a more in-depth interview and so as not to interfere with the observation schedule.

Following each observation session, I reviewed the information gathered and noted the demographic characteristics of people who were observed engaging in conversation at each location and the total number of people observed at each location. I then reached out to the subjects who had been approached during the observation process to set up interview appointments. I completed a total of five observation sessions, which included the initial mapping session. Session length averaged an hour with the shortest being 50 minutes and the longest being 90 minutes. A total of 15 single-spaced pages of observational data was collected.

Interview participants were asked a series of questions in a semi-structured interview format. The interviews focused on the themes of neighborhood belonging, connectedness, and civic engagement but also allowed for divergent areas of interest to be investigated when they arose. One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2006) was reached and no new themes emerged. I interviewed a total of 20 participants. The four initial interviews occurred as close to the time of the observations as possible so that pertinent information was less likely to be lost. In order to have the interview data captured as effectively as possible, interviews were digitally recorded. I transcribed five of the interviews and sent the remaining files to Rev.com for transcription. Interview times ranged from nine to 42 minutes with the average interview lasting 24 minutes. The twenty interviews resulted in 176 single-spaced pages of transcribed data.

### **Data Analysis Method**

Immediately following each mapping or observation session, I reviewed my field notes and wrote analytical memos to capture my first impressions and reflections about the locations, people and interactions that were observed (Keyton, 2015). Observed conversational themes were noted for future comparison to interview data.

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed as they occurred, allowing for an evolving interview and analysis process. After each interview recording was transcribed, its transcript was read closely a number of times using open coding to reveal recurrent themes (Broom, 2005). Broad topics of discussion like family, politics and community were identified and enumerated according to each encounter. Then observational data was compared with the interview transcript in an effort to discern the validity of the transcript data (Kvale, 2007).

The broad topics revealed in the interviews were then further analyzed using line by line coding of the interview transcripts (Charmaz, 2006); where each line of the transcript was read independently and summarized in a single word or phrase. This coding process helped to determine sub-categories of conversation like health, relationships, specific political issues or other emergent areas of interest. This process also provided topics to be investigated in the next phase of analysis, focused coding (Charmaz, 2006).

Focused coding was used to compare data between interviews (Charmaz, 2006). The most frequent or significant codes found in the line by line coding were used to filter larger amounts of data from multiple interview texts to find commonalities. Focused coding allowed me to compare the kinds of stories shared between differing communication assets and between subjects with demographic differences as well. I was particularly interested in stories that alluded to increased civic engagement like those that center on regional, state or national events or issues as opposed to those that were more personal/family related. However, all stories were analyzed.

I also used memo-writing as a way to further analyze and explore the data (Charmaz, 2006). I used the focus codes that were developed as the topics of memo-writing exercises, combined with the information I gathered from the interviews and observations and synthesized it around the topic. Memo-writing helped me to crystallize my conclusions and illuminate my findings.

A total of 15 single-spaced pages of memos were created between analytical memos of observations and focus code memos from interviews. In sum, there was a total of 209 single-spaced pages of data taken from observations, interviews and memo writing.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings**

I will begin my analysis by addressing RQ1, which asked: What locations do rural residents identify as communication assets in the rural community of Huntsville, Arkansas? I will start by outlining the locations that were identified as communication assets and then categorize those assets into comfort zones, which are places with which residents proclaimed an emotional connection, and hot spots, which are places of spontaneous conversation.

I will then address the second research question: What are the kinds of stories residents share at different communication assets throughout the rural community of Huntsville, Arkansas? First, I will describe the relationships that the communication agents, who are the community storytellers, have with those they reported conversing with and their relationship to the community as a whole. I will then take a closer look at the content of the stories that they share as well as the topics of conversation they avoid.

### **Communication Assets in a Rural Community**

Participants named nearly every public space in the community as a communication asset (e.g. a physical location where storytelling takes place). They reported running into or meeting someone with whom they would have a conversation at every location they visited. These conversations would often occur multiple times a day. Places of business were most prevalent with Wal-Mart being specifically named most often. Public spaces, such as parks or the library were also mentioned but with much less frequency. It was clear that the participants not only expected these public encounters but looked forward to them. Of the places identified as communication assets, the overwhelming majority could be considered comfort zones, which are places with which participants felt an emotional connection (Wilkin, et al., 2011), although some

spaces might carry more significance than others. Communication assets that could be described solely as hot spots, which are places of spontaneous conversation (Wilkin, et al., 2011), were reported less often and were generally related to community events rather than actual physical locations.

**Comfort zones.** The respondents reported having an emotional connection to most of the places they went in their community. Therefore, the majority of public locations in Huntsville could be classified as comfort zones. The respondents disclosed that they often went to these public locations with the expectation of, and sometimes with the intention to engage in interpersonal communication. These are places they reported visiting their entire lives, places where they have worked, and places that they frequent on a weekly if not daily basis. Two main themes emerged as to why most places in the community were considered comfort zones. First, many physical places in the community have existed for generations, which in turn, has created memories for the community that span from their childhood to their adult hood. Second, residents often described their community as a “family,” which fostered a sense of walking into one’s home even in a public space.

To begin, part of the reason why so many locations were comfort zones was due to the fact that many of the businesses have been fixtures in the community for decades. Residents who grew up in the area visited them as children, worked at them as young adults, and now take their own families there to do business. These locations are an integral part of their memories and touchstones for their personal histories. This was particularly the case for Connor, a recently married college student who is a community native. As he explained, “Pretty much everywhere we go there's either somebody we graduated with or somebody that knew us when we were little.

They kind of just know who we are and we got to say ‘hi.’ That type of stuff.” He went on to specifically mention a local gas station:

One of the places I feel at home is Fuel Zone because my mom worked there for a really long time when I was in middle school. I know a lot of the people that worked there. I know the owner, I know most of the customers that come in... It's just that type of, I guess just feeling like you belong in that area, just feels home.

Like Connor, Taylor grew up in the community. He is a work-at-home dad of four who is a fourth-generation resident. He considers the schools a comfort zone because he “grew up in the school district and now my kids attend school there.” Other places that felt like home were a couple of the “old staple restaurants” that he frequented with his parents and now takes his children to.

Unlike Connor and Taylor, Diane is a transplant to the community. Although she was not raised in Huntsville, she has lived in the community nearly 45 years, raised her children there, and retired from the local school district where she worked as a high school teacher. Throughout the decades that she has lived in the community she has developed many close relationships even though she has no family ties to the area other than her own children. It is obvious in her responses that her trips to town are more than just shopping trips:

I go to The Attic to not necessarily to shop, but to visit with Pat or whatever. I go to Memory Lane. I do the thrift stores is mainly why I go, and there's always people.... I go to Paws and Claws because I always drop in there and visit forever. Walmart, I see people I know. I go to The Pantry, and I know the people that work there.

It is not just her friendships that make visiting local businesses a social affair. Due to her many years of teaching Diane “can hardly get through the aisles” at the local Walmart “before running into students.”

Like Diane, Phoebe is a transplant to the community. Although her residential tenure is not nearly as long as Diane’s 45 years in the community, she is an elementary school teacher

who married into a well-established family and raised her children in the community. She also mentions the ease that her years of familiarity with the businesses around town affords when she says, “you get comfortable with Walmart... You realize how comfortable you get” when you go into places like that. But Phoebe expresses an even deeper connection to places in town and to the friends she has made there, when talking about her workplace, “I’m very blessed to have a place where we’re just a family... And I just walk in and it just feels that this is where I belong.” *Family* is a word many of the respondents used when describing their ties to others in the community. Although many had actual familial ties, it was also commonly used to express the connection felt among friends.

Taylor, the work at home dad, talked about the scouting group he and his son belong to saying, “We’ve got a scout or two and some leaders that have just been there our whole journey through. They feel like family.” Bobbi, a retired educator and coach, who moved to the area from a neighboring state to be near her daughter about nine years ago gave a prime example when, while talking about places that feel like home, she stated, “Our church is a family. First church I’ve ever been in that everyone, they’re family.” She goes on to talk about how she and her husband would not go anywhere else even though her daughter’s family attends church in a nearby city.

Church was also a place that was mentioned frequently as a place that felt like home. Taylor mentioned his church when talking about places he spent time at as a child that his children now visit like school and some of the local restaurants. Margaret, a semi-retired city employee who was born and raised in the area and raised her own children there, attributed the emotional connection to her church to the historical connection she has with it. When asked about places she considers to be like home she replied, “My church... 'cause I've gone to the

same church most of my life... there's things about memories that come when you walk in those doors.” But Kelly, a 14-year resident, stay at home mom with no familial ties to the area and whose youngest child recently graduated from high school, mentioned a different reason, “I feel like that (at home) when I go to Alex's (a close family friend) church, the Assembly of God. I like that place. Everybody's very welcoming, whether they know you or not.”

**Hot spots.** With most public spaces considered comfort zones, including privately owned businesses; the hot spots in the community tend to be related to events rather than the locations where they occur. For a few respondents, who considered themselves as outsiders, nearly every place was considered a hot spot. There were also a couple of locations that, due to the nature of the business conducted there were also considered hot spots.

Kelly, a stay at home mom, suggested a few events where community residents might meet and converse, “They always have those car shows. There's always people going to that. There for a while they were doing... those movies. The Tuesday swap meets, things like that.” Diane, the retired teacher included, “the farmer's market when that's in session,” and Bobbi, a newer nine year resident who moved here after she retired to be with her family, added, “a lot of people gather to watch the high school sports,” These events may be cyclical in nature, occurring every year or at designated times, but they are not permanent fixtures in the community and can move from location to location depending on changes in policy or even changes in the weather. Participants also included infrequent events. Phoebe, the elementary school teacher noted school fundraisers or community celebrations as potential places for spontaneous interactions.

The only participants who did not claim to have comfort zones in the community were those that considered themselves to be outsiders and conducted most of their business in the

nearby urban centers. Chip, a relatively 'new' resident who has lived in the area for 14 years but works in a nearby urban center stated the only reason he goes to town is:

Groceries, and seems like auto parts lately. Yeah, you need a headlight, bulb or something minuscule like that, so, or we pass through, 'cause we have a boat up on the lake, near Eureka, so we go through town. I don't know. It's not a huge draw anymore.

Chip claimed a stronger emotional connection to the outdoors than to locations in the community:

I like the woods around here... I like that a lot. I like doing stuff around here. But no, as far as town to me, I think it's 'cause I lived in the country for so long, it's the place you go for necessities.

Carolyn, a self-employed domestic worker whose family moved to the area when she was 16 and does not belong to any community groups or organizations, shares Chip's connection to the outdoors:

So yeah, no, I don't have a connection like that (meaning an emotional connection to somewhere in town). I mean, I used to go out to Withrow (Withrow Springs State Park) a lot and just hang out, with the little creek, and I love that. I'm just outdoorsy. To me, my solitude is getting into the truck and hitting the dirt road. Windows down, radio up. That's my peace of mind.

Chip and Carolyn both imply that their emotional connection to the outdoors precludes them from creating emotional connections to locations in town. Therefore, they would be considered as having no comfort zones in the community.

There were only a few places in town that people admitted avoiding. Nina, a young Hispanic woman who grew up in the community and recently returned after attending college, stated, "the place I tend to avoid is around the Butterball Center (a turkey processing plant), just because it's so, it's always busy and it just feels kind of, it doesn't, it just feels kind of strange driving through there." Even though the processing plant is a major employer in the community and Nina has many friends and acquaintances that work there, the mass slaughter of turkeys

which occurs on site prevents her from developing any sense of emotional connection to that place. And Chip, who has a corporate job in a nearby urban center and has been in the area for about 14 years, mentioned the county revenue office as a place he does not like to visit, jokingly offering the excuse, “I don’t like them down there.” “Them” being the local politicians. Unlike lifetime residents who may not appreciate paying their taxes but would still consider those who work for the revenue office as friends, Chip’s avoidance of the county courthouse reinforces his claim of not feeling connected to the community or those who have been elected to serve it.

Because most locations in town are considered communication assets, respondents avoided going to town altogether if they felt unsociable. Emily, a recently married college student who grew up in the area and has extended family ties in the community, stated that if there is something that has happened recently that you do not want to talk about “you might not want to go out.” Chip, her husband and lifetime resident, expounded, “It’s just something you kind of expect. It’s like you’re just going to run into somebody... even going and picking up pizza, you know the people that are going to hand you the pizza and they’ll be like, ‘Oh, hey, tell your mom I said hi.’ You’ll probably run into somebody that you know, no matter what you’re doing.” Taylor, a life-long resident and work-at-home dad summed it up best when he said, “I think people expect to see and be seen when they go there (town), so that's kind of the expectation is that ... Just be prepared to be friendly and speak when you see somebody you know.”

It was not difficult to identify communication assets in Huntsville. At every location observed, community residents could be found in conversation with one another. Whether they were waiting in line or walking through a parking lot. It was not uncommon to see residents visiting in the aisles of stores or the middle of the street. Interview respondents corroborated the

observational findings with their recollections of conversations they participated in daily at local businesses and other public venues. Further, of all the public spaces identified through observation or interview as being communication assets; the overwhelming majority of them could be considered comfort zones, due to the long-time familiarity residents had with each location, visiting them as children and eventually bringing their own children to visit them.

### **Defining the Storytelling Network**

RQ2 asked what kinds of stories residents share at different communication assets throughout the rural community of Huntsville, Arkansas. To create a more complete understanding of Huntsville's storytelling network, I will first explain my findings regarding who is sharing stories, what their relation is to one another, and what their relation is to the community. I then will present the topics/types of stories respondents reported sharing at communication assets. I will conclude with a look at stories respondents are reticent to share.

**Conversation partners.** The respondents reported visiting with family members, friends, acquaintances and even strangers at different communication assets throughout the community. The people that participants tended to converse with most often at these locations were generally people they have known for a long time. Clark, an 80-something year old resident whose family has lived in Huntsville for generations visits with the same group of eight to 15 men that he has known "all my life" every morning at a local gas station. Taylor, a fourth-generation resident and work-at-home dad, describes the people he visits with as "Mostly acquaintances that either I've gone to school with or my ... we're just family friends with or just familiar because my family has known their family for a couple generations now."

Conversation partners might also be people who work at these locations and because participants frequent that location often, they have become friends. Janet, a local business owner states:

But those that I see, I kinda know, I consider them beyond just an acquaintance. For a customer relationship sort of thing. Because I've just over years grown to know a lot about their past and their history... I'm interested in who you are and whatever. So yeah, I think you get past that and I think that that is, the repetition of it.

The repeated interaction of daily living created connections that would not have developed any other way.

Connections to extended family members can also be the basis for finding public conversation partners. Phoebe a participant who is married to a multi-generational resident says:

If you just get out, if you're out and about and your face is out there, they'll ask how I'm related to the Johnson's (pseudonym), you know, my last name, so then I tell them. So it doesn't matter if it's a stranger or what. The Johnson name is known, for sure, especially locals. Then what's fun is, they wanna know how you're connected to my family, but it is fun too.

Having a well-known last name, even if it is through marriage, invites conversations that might otherwise have gone unspoken.

The length of residence that accompanies small town life creates bonds between people and places that the transient lifestyle found in more urban areas neglects to foster. This longevity can be transferred to "outsiders" who marry into a multi-generational family; as illustrated in Phoebe's previous statement and also supported by Janet, a local business owner, when she stated:

It's almost to the point people forget that I'm not from here. I still have some that do but because I married a local it's like, 'Janet do you remember back when we were in school?' And I say, 'I didn't go to school here,' you know that sort of thing, you know, because I've been here so long, and I'm married to a local. Or I was ... he's passed away. So they forget sometimes.

Connections to the school, or perhaps more importantly to the children that attend school, can create the same effect as family connections. Carol, an elementary school teacher who moved to the area after her husband passed away 11 years ago said:

And you see when I first came, I think it's been 11 years. I was that teacher of "Well who are you?" "Who's your mama?" And I'd be like, ahh you don't know them, I don't have anybody here. But when I started attending the peewee basketball games; going to the kids sports. And then I started being accepted into that group of mama's.

By showing an interest in the children in her classes, Carol was able to forge connections with their parents and by extension the parents of all of the children in the school. It is the connections that are important. Samantha, the store manager, put it best when she said, "But you know, you weren't really accepted in the community until people figured out who you were; who you are related to. I mean, I think everybody, all in all, is pretty accepting. It's just that they have to figure out how to accept you." Carol expounded a bit on the community's desire to be accepting when she said, "And if they can wrap you around into knowing somebody else or being related to somebody else or being part of something else that somebody's in; then they'll find a way to wrap you." Thus, even though Carol did not have a familial connection, people in the community brought her into their storytelling networks by "wrapping" her around a shared interest in the community's youth.

The phrase *close-knit* was used often throughout the data collection process. Long-time residents and transplants alike used the term to describe their community. Kathy, a convenience store cashier whose parents moved to a nearby urban center when she was young and who returned to raise her own children, used the term to describe how people look out for each other:

I would honestly say I think it's pretty close knit, for the most part. It's kinda like I told my kids, when they were younger, you can't get away with stuff. I was like, "If you didn't end up telling on yourself, somebody's gonna tell me."

She applied the term to not only raising a family but also when describing how community members honestly care for one another when she said, “I think that if you needed something and people knew you needed it, they would go out of their way to help you. ... I think that way, it's pretty close.” Karen, a school administrator who had moved away after college but came back to be near her parents and raise her own family agrees, “I feel like it’s a close-knit community. I feel like people do look out for each other... always being willing to help others.

Samantha, the manager of a local gas station and long-time resident who grew up in a nearby community and married into a multi-generational resident family, has a slightly different view of what she calls her “tight knit” community. She agrees that, “there is a tight knit group, that you know, they take care of each other and all that.” But goes on to say, “But I think it’s changed a lot as far as with the times, you know. It’s not like it used to be.” Samantha believes the reason for the change is the growth of the community and the unfamiliarity that new residents bring.

Chip, a professional who moved to the area about 14 years ago to be near the outdoors but who works in a nearby urban center, revealed how he feels on the other side of the close-knit community after his youngest child graduated from high school and he lost the one connection that brought him in to town ,when he stated:

Most the people that we associated with and things have moved on, or they got involved with other things and we don't see them as often, or things ... I couldn't even name anybody right now... It's very tight knit if you're in that mesh. I mean, we're kind of outsiders.

Carolyn, a self-employed domestic worker and long-time resident whose family moved to the area when she was 16 and who claimed no community organizational ties, also felt a limited connection to the community, revealing a negative connotation of “close knit” when she stated,

“It's a small town. It's close knit. I've lived here since I was 16, and I'm still treated kind of like an outsider. So, it's kind of hard to get in to.”

**The stories they tell.** The dominant themes of conversation respondents revealed were micro level topics with personal stories regarding family being the most prevalent. Meso level topics, topics related to community level issues, like community events or the upcoming vote to increase the millage were seldom mentioned. And macro level topics, which are regional or national issues, were mentioned rarely and usually as topics of discussion that would happen behind closed doors and not in public spaces if possible. As Martha, an 80-something retired native who does not spend much time in town explained:

Well normally when I talk to someone it is about their work if they are still working or I will catch up with family. What our families are doing. I'm not much to discuss politics or religion with somebody else. It is usually more personal type things. If I know them well enough to stop them and talk to them, it is about what they have been doing, and our families, mutual friends.

For Martha the demarcation was clear between topics that were acceptable to discuss in public like “personal type things,” which could be categorized as micro level topics, and those that are unacceptable such as politics, which could be categorized as meso and macro level topics. But even those who are much younger than Martha and spend most of their time in and around town share the same types of stories. Emily, a recent high school graduate who is attending college in a nearby urban center but who lives and works in town, shared:

It depends, like, how much we know about their life and how much they know about our life. Because they might ask, "Oh, how's school going?" Or, "How are you liking theater?" I might be like, "Oh, you just had a baby. How's that?" Or, "Congratulations" and stuff like that. If I know more about their life and they know more about mine, usually it's a deeper conversation. But if we're just kind of like acquaintances, it will more just be like, "Oh, how have you been doing? It's nice to see you."

When asked to explain what she meant by deeper, Emily replied, “Deeper, as in like, more into the details of each other's lives.” Thus, revealing that residents who may know each other well avoid probing deeper into each other’s thoughts or feelings about personal or local issues and instead talk about their personal lives in a more specific, event-oriented way.

The content of the conversations was often dictated by the relationship the participant had with the person with whom they were conversing, as alluded to previously by Emily. Diane, a retired high school teacher explained, “With former students, they're usually telling me what they're doing and if they have kids. If they've used their Spanish lately, and stuff, right?” With people she considers to be acquaintances she reported saying things like, "Have you seen so and so? I haven't seen her in a long time" or "What are they up to?" or "Did they move or do you know?" or "How're they doing? I know they were sick." She then talked about topics she might discuss with people she has just met in the store, where conversations are even more general in nature like, "Do you have any good ideas about whatever. I'm shopping in the plants. What are you planting this year? Are you going to do a garden?" For Diane, common interests or experiences provided a way to stay connected to others in her community. Conversation topics were chosen to maintain relationships and reassure conversational partners of her continued interest in them and their lives.

Karen, a local school administrator, also chose her topics of discussion according to the relationship she has with the person with whom she was conversing. Like Diane she differentiated between people she knows, acquaintances, and strangers stating:

Someone I know, usually it will be about family. They will ask about my family, my children. Or if they connect me with school, there will usually be a conversation about my job or connected to my job about the school. If it's people I don't know it might just be something random about, like if we're in the checkout line, you know, they could bring up any topic. Just like, “How are you today?” Just starting a conversation.

Even though at the time of data collection, the school administration was asking for a millage increase to help them provide better educational opportunities; Karen prioritized relational topics like many of the other residents expressed. Participants focused on micro-level stories in order to protect and build personal relationships rather than discuss meso- or macro-level issues that may be perceived as divisive and a threat to interpersonal relationships. Consequently, the desire to focus on micro-level stories came at the expense of opportunities to share meso-level stories that may solve community level problems.

When at a location where participants intended or expected to spend time visiting with those they met, the conversations could become more confidential but maintained their micro-level content. Janet, a business owner whose clients often become more than acquaintances, relayed a memorable encounter. She talked of how a long-time client, over the course of multiple visits to her business, shared the problems of dealing with a parent with dementia. Throughout these multiple and deeply personal micro-level conversations, Janet forged a bond with her client. This example provides a prime example of the willingness of community members to share what could be considered very personal experiences in a very public space, a local business. Fiona, a life-long resident who lives down the street from her parents and siblings and is a sub-contractor who works in a shared office space, also relayed a conversation with a repeat customer that became what could be considered almost too personal:

Well, this one man come, ... and he's getting older and a few health problems and all this ...and he says, that makes me so mad, my Viagra has gone up to ... I forgot how ... \$80 a pill... I looked over and said, "How's your wife doing?" Get him off the subject. They'll tell you anything.

Although such a personal topic was a bit uncomfortable for Fiona, she expressed that she was more concerned about offending other clients who were in her place of business than her own comfort level.

While discussing a family members personal struggles or one's own sexual health might be considered acceptable public conversation for respondents, when asked if they discuss political or even local issues in public the majority of participants answered with a resounding no, considering political views too private a topic to be discussed in public. Karen, the school administrator, when asked if she ever discussed national politics with people she visited with while shopping stated, "I can't ever think of a time that I talked about a national issue just coming across someone in a store. Maybe if you were in a setting somewhere else. A more personal setting maybe. Not public." Karen does not exclude the idea of talking about political issues entirely with others. She only expresses the need to do so out of the public eye. However, Samantha, the manager at a local convenience store, expressed a much stronger resistance to the possibility of discussing politics in public. When asked if she discussed politics with people she ran into at the store she stated, "I have to be very careful. Yeah, so that would be an avoided conversation. Now maybe my husband and I discuss it right. But it would be a private conversation." Samantha deemed political conversations as both something to be avoided and as sensitive exchanges that need to be handled carefully. Samantha perceives political conversations about meso- and macro-level issues as so threatening to interpersonal relationships within her community that she reserves discussions about meso- and macro-level issues for her husband in the confines of their own home.

Martha, the retired octogenarian also expressed that one's opinions about politics and political issues are too private to discuss in public. Martha elaborated on this sentiment offering a justification for her reluctance. When asked if she discussed politics with people she ran into in town, Martha replied:

Probably not. I always consider that is a very personal thing to say to somebody. Not unless they instigate it. It's not something I bring up. Not even during election times and

stuff. Some (inaudible) are not all the same as we are. You have to know who to discuss those things with.

It appears as if Martha's reluctance to broach political topics in public, even "during election times" when those topics are at the height of their importance and exposure, stems from a desire to avoid making others uncomfortable. Recognizing that not all community members share her opinions Martha prefers to keep her opinions to herself or share them only with people she knows she can "discuss those things with."

**Maintaining relationships.** Not every participant offered reasons for the lack of meso- and macro-level discussion but those that did claimed preserving relationships as the biggest justification. Respondents identified different motives for their desire to protect their relationships. For some it was the avoidance of hurt feelings, for others it was a means of keeping the peace, and still others considered it imperative to maintaining a successful business. Huntsville residents define themselves and others by the relationships that they have within the community. Their social identity fundamentally impacts their daily activities and interactions.

Taylor, a work-at-home dad of four whose family has lived in the community for generations, described his experience of living in Huntsville, "We can't go anywhere real quickly in a small town like this. You always run into somebody you know." He then described his relationships to those he meets while in town saying, "(They are) mostly acquaintances that either I've gone to school with or just family friends we are familiar with because my family has known their family for a couple of generations now." Taylor also expressed the depth of the connection that he feels to community members when he explains, "I think of that (asking about their family) as just a way of saying I love you almost in a way. You know. You know, I care and I'm curious about the people you care about." Like Taylor, Fiona's family has been in the community for generations and she describes her experiences much the same way, "I run into

someone every time (I go to town), more than two or three usually.” She adds, “Out of all the family, you’re bound to run into one or two of them.” And then referring to the 20+ years she has worked in town she said, “You learn a lot of people during that time, my customers plus Betty’s (her business partner).”

Kathy, a single mother who cashiers at a local gas station, expressed that it was her desire to be near family, that brought her back to Huntsville to raise her children. She explained, “ I live about three miles down that dirt road and have four aunts and uncles that live down that way, and lots of cousins...My first cousin lives closer to me and both of my other uncle’s daughters live within a mile or so... all on the same property.” Like Taylor and Fiona, Kathy finds it impossible to go to town without running into someone she knows. When asked about the frequency of meeting someone while shopping she replied, “I’ll usually see a cousin or an aunt or somebody.” She also included customers that frequent her place of work, people she knew from previous jobs, and friends in the list of those she might engage with when in town.

This persistent, almost forced, daily interaction with people who have a direct impact on your life creates an intense desire to maintain a comfortable atmosphere, which leads to the avoidance of controversial subjects that may potentially make someone uncomfortable. Chip, a relatively new resident who works outside the community, framed his avoidance of controversial topics succinctly when he stated, “In a smaller community, you could offend somebody, and you've gotta see them again on Tuesday.” Taylor, shared Chip’s opinion but articulated his hesitance to discuss controversial issues in public in a more personal way using phrases like “keep the peace” and “just try to get along.” He elaborated a bit, saying, “You know you're going to run into them eventually, so it just ... So there's no awkward feelings or tension.” In this way

they each prioritized the relationship with an individual and their desire to “get along” over the needs of the community as a whole.

Samantha, a local business manager, put her reasoning for avoiding meso- and macro-level topics in a more relational perspective saying, “Yeah you have to be careful what you say. (laughs) Not that I would say it, but you have to be extremely careful. I mean because everybody is related to everybody around here you know.” Samantha’s acknowledgement of the multitude of familial connections that link together community residents underscores the high level of integration that community members have with one another.

Nettie, a retired life-long resident who belongs to several social groups, saw her conversational topic choices from a much more personal point of view when she said, “We kinda avoid talking about politics as far as the president, that type of stuff, in our groups, because they’re all (the group members) different...and that’s the quickest way to lose a friend. So we avoid that.” Like Taylor and Chip, Nettie’s priority is maintaining her relationships with her friends by avoiding controversial topics that may cause them discomfort.

Janet, a business owner, stressed the importance of maintaining not just personal but professional relationships when she stated:

You don’t have to jeopardize your values. I don’t mean it like that. But you just need to, a lot of times because you’re in the business, you kind of need to refrain from being so outgoing about some of your feelings. Not only because you need to because you are in a small town. But if you make someone dislike you and they have a lot of family and they have a lot of friends, they will stop using your business. And I mean, so you gotta, you gotta play the game to a certain extent.

By revealing the impact that making a customer uncomfortable or even angry by expressing a divergent opinion can have, Janet acknowledged the high level of integration in the community and the social and financial cost that prioritizing issues over relationships can have on a business.

**Meso- and macro-level stories.** Participants reported discussing meso- or macro-level stories when the issues involved children, when someone else had initiated the topic, or when they were in conversation with politically likeminded individuals. For Janet, a local business owner and longtime resident, the community's youth were an important enough topic to break her self-imposed rule about "being Switzerland" when in conversations at work. She stated:

I talk a lot to teachers about where our young people are now... And I made the comment I said, "Oh I bet your kiddos are getting", you know summer breaks coming on and they're second graders. And she went to shaking her head and saying no. And I said what? And she was talking about how a lot of their home life ... they don't always know what can happen if they're at home. That's pretty much how she said it. And it brought tears to my eyes... I didn't know it had gotten that bad. And so, now I will talk about that and yeah, I will voice my opinion. Because you don't hurt the kids... But local politics, yeah, we just don't go down that road.

Janet created a clear delineation between youth related issues and local politics as if they were mutually exclusive topics. However, she was not the only respondent to express youth related issues as an acceptable topic of public discourse. Nettie, the socially active longtime native, admitted that even though her social groups do not talk about "the outside world" too much, they have talked about the upcoming millage vote, saying:

Oh, yeah. This group that I'm in, we talk about it, and they don't understand why it doesn't get passed. We can't understand... we know how important it is for our kids. A lot of people don't realize how many kids we've got. They think it's just a small town, and not very many kids ...

She and the rest of the members of her group equate the millage with doing something important for "our kids." Even Karen, the school administrator who does not discuss issues while out shopping admitted that she may talk about youth related issues in public when she stated, "The only community issue it would probably normally be, would be maybe connected with my work at school." She went on to say that she would not share her own opinion, but as a school

authority and a parent she would offer information and would go out of her way to correct someone who had misleading information.

Clark was the only respondent to admit to freely discussing meso- and macro- level issues in public. A retired postal worker who has lived in town his entire life and is currently living with his wife of 45 years in the same home they built when they first got married, Clark spends every morning at a local gas station with a group of men around his same age talking, “mostly just bull,” that “don’t amount to much.” He referred to this group as a “coffee shop deal.” Along with topics like the weather, sports, cards, and gardening they discuss “Trump,” the millage, and local politics. Even though more controversial topics are discussed, they are not debated. Clark affirmed that the dozen or so men are like minded when it comes to politics and in general are in agreement on their topics of conversation. Unlike the other respondents, Clark and his friends do not talk about their families much. Clark stated that, “there’s about, probably six of them’s (sic) bachelors. So they don’t have anything that amounts to anything.” Clark revealed that by sticking to topics like politics their group discussions are inclusive of everyone, and by avoiding topics like family they avoid making some group members uncomfortable or unable to participate.

One other participant, Diane, a self-proclaimed hippie who moved to the area over 40 years ago to “live off the land” and who moved into town after having children and realizing the health risks that living off the grid posed for her, reported discussing meso- and macro-level issues on occasion, usually with those “who want to know what I know” about a specific issue. Diane worked at the local newspaper before accepting a teaching position at the high school. She is now retired but fills her time volunteering for several local organizations namely the library, the pet shelter, her church, and a regional theatre arts non-profit. She attributed the reason

community members ask her opinion on community issues to her community involvement when she stated, “I think they see me as someone who knows things and maybe I used to know more than I do now because I was involved more either with the newspaper or with school. And I still try to keep up.” She also stated that the current political climate has curtailed the meso- and macro-level conversations she will have in public, “Because people are so hot tempered about things lately... I don't do politics at Walmart unless somebody asks me my opinion and then I'll give it. Otherwise, I just forget it ...” Here Diane reveals that like previous respondents she prioritizes relationships, but she also acknowledges that if given the opening she is willing to participate in the creation and exchange of meso- and macro-level stories within the storytelling network. Nevertheless, not all meso- and macro-level topics are considered suitable. When asked if there were topics that she would avoid completely she stated:

Sometimes I do avoid politics. I just don't go there. Sometimes I avoid ... It depends on my mood. Avoid talk about immigration because a lot of people don't realize that Miguel (her son-in-law) is a recent immigrant, and then I get really angry when people are ugly about immigrants. So, I'll just avoid that.

She added that Miguel has recently passed his citizenship test and is now a full citizen after nearly 10 years of waiting. Like other respondents she also reported not discussing religion, especially if she felt like the person with whom she was speaking was trying to manipulate her in some way. She also noted that she refuses to gossip or participate in any conversation where racist comments are being made, “I'll put an end to any conversation that somebody starts about race. I'll say, "Well, I just really don't agree with you there. Let's go somewhere else.”

Throughout the interview Diane used the term “like-minded” when referencing those with whom she discussed more controversial issues. In doing so, she revealed that she was careful about with whom she chose to share her more controversial opinions. Choosing conversation partners with similar political views allowed the open discussion of what otherwise

would be considered controversial issues without the fear of offending someone or making them feel uncomfortable. Although both Clark and Diane were willing to discuss controversial issues in public spaces, they both chose their conversation partners carefully making sure to express their opinions with those who would share their point of view.

The findings for this study were fairly straightforward. Nearly all the public locations in the rural community of Huntsville, Arkansas were reported to be communication assets. Of all the communication assets in the community the majority could be classified as comfort zones due to the residential tenure of community members and the familial connections respondents reported having with others in the community. The stories shared by participants as part of the storytelling network lacked ecological diversity in the sense that residents primarily shared micro-level stories about personal and family issues. Respondents provided a few reasons for the avoidance of sharing meso- and macro-level stories in the storytelling network. These reasons included, avoiding hurt feelings, keeping the peace, and maintaining business relationships. In the following chapter I will explain the theoretical and practical implications of these findings.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this thesis was to employ communication infrastructure theory outside of its traditional applications, which have been studied in urban centers like Los Angeles and Atlanta. Instead, this study sought to test the theory's transferability to a rural community in northwest Arkansas known as Huntsville. Through qualitative interviews and observation, I found that Huntsville residents consider nearly every public space, including local businesses, a communication asset with the majority of those being classified as comfort zones. Another important finding is that Huntsville residents primarily communicate with one another at the micro-level, discussing personal topics related to family. Rarely did respondents address meso or macro-level subjects outside the confines of their own homes, considering those matters too private or sensitive to be discussed in public. Theoretically these findings suggest that the application of communication infrastructure theory is different for Huntsville, Arkansas than it has been in previous studies in metropolitan areas. Whereas robust communication infrastructures in urban environments often lead to increased feelings of belonging and civic engagement (Broad et al., 2013), robust rural communication infrastructures do not yield the exact same outcome. As applied research this study reveals several ways that communication infrastructure theory can be used to benefit Huntsville and build a healthier community storytelling network. In this chapter, I will first discuss the theoretical implications of this study, outlining the way the community of Huntsville defines the majority of its public spaces as comfort zones and the impact that has on the community storytelling network. I will also discuss how community connectedness serves as a psychological factor that constrains the communication action context in the rural storytelling network. Next, I will identify the practical

implications of the study's findings and propose ways in which the community could improve the health of its storytelling network and create a more open communication action context. Finally, I will discuss the limitations of this study and outline a rural communication infrastructure research agenda.

### **Theoretical Implications**

My first research questions asked, what locations do rural residents identify as communication assets in the rural community of Huntsville, Arkansas. In short, the overwhelming answer was that any public location in the community could be considered a communication asset, either a hot spot, a place where residents gather, or a comfort zone, a community institution with which residents feel an emotional connection (Villanueva, et al., 2016); with the majority of the locations eventually becoming comfort zones. Residents felt free to engage each other in conversation whether they were at the park or frequenting a local business, every public space, publicly or privately owned, was a communication asset. The second research question asked, what kinds of stories residents share at different communication assets throughout the rural community of Huntsville, Arkansas. Respondents revealed that the majority of stories they shared at these locations were at the micro level. That is, with few exceptions, residents reported sharing stories about their immediate families and inquiring about that same set of topics of others when in public spaces. Respondents also admitted that they rarely discuss matters of meso or macro-level importance when in public. Common themes uncovered during analysis offer some explanations for this shared communication behavior. I will begin by discussing how the communication assets findings extend our understanding of public spaces in rural communication infrastructures.

**Every place is a comfort zone.** In the rural community of Huntsville, Arkansas every public space whether publicly or privately owned served as a comfort zone. Because so many public locations in the community were identified as communication assets, it became clear early in the data collection process that communication asset mapping would reveal little insight. Unlike Villanueva and colleagues (2011), whose research teams were able to wander neighborhoods and spot public interaction, in Huntsville, interactions were taking place inside local businesses and not in open public spaces. Therefore, I had to rely on interview data to identify specific locations in the community that acted as communication assets. Even though the observations gathered during the mapping process provided no unique findings, they did provide corroboration for the themes revealed in the interviews with respondents.

Communication infrastructure theory emphasizes the important role that hot spots, places where residents gather, and comfort zones, community institutions with which residents feel an emotional connection, play in the community storytelling network (Villanueva, et al., 2016). Hot spots and comfort zones are not mutually exclusive designations; however they play different roles in the community storytelling network. Hotspots are gathering places where spontaneous discursive interaction takes place (Villanueva, et al, 2016). Although this describes nearly every public location in the community of Huntsville residents have developed emotional attachments to those same locations turning them into comfort zones. For long-time residents whose families have lived in the community for generations, these communication assets are fixed entities that are inherent to their storytelling networks. For new residents, these communication assets may start out as hot spots but eventually become comfort zones due to the repetition and the familiarity of visiting them on a daily basis. Wilkin and colleagues (2011) include businesses in their definition of comfort zones, recognizing that residents can feel emotionally connected to

places of business. And throughout the data collection process we see this hold true. Respondents reported their feelings of connectedness to many of the local businesses, from the mom-and-pop type stores to the large national chains.

An individual's residential tenure is one of the most influential factors in developing social bonds and associational ties (Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974; Sampson, 1991, Kang & Kwak, 2003). Residentially stable areas, like Huntsville, provide new residents with more opportunities to form friendships regardless of their own length of residence (Sampson, 1991). This creates a space where new residents find themselves engaging in spontaneous discourse at local businesses throughout town when they first arrive. Also, the time needed to develop personal relationships is shortened. Eventually, should they stay in the community for even a few months, the local businesses and public spaces they regularly visit will begin to become destinations for connection as well as places to buy goods and services; changing them from hot spots to comfort zones.

**Micro level storytelling.** Nearly every respondent reported telling micro level stories and excluding meso and macro-level stories when they participated in public discourse. The majority of their stories centered on the family; their activities, health, and overall well-being. The more connected a person was to the person they were conversing with the more detailed the conversation about family was, mentioning specific events or shared interests. But these close connections that created such personal interest rarely produced discussion at a meso or macro-level of importance.

Communication infrastructure theory poses that the job of a community's meso-level agents, such as community organizations, is to focus attention on issues that are of concern to the community (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001). A problem for the Huntsville community is revealed

when we realize that Huntsville residents also reported talking solely about micro-level issues when in interpersonal exchanges at community organization meetings. It appears that the only time meso-level issues were discussed was during the business portion of meetings and then those topics were immediately tabled until the next meeting. So, although meso-level agents may focus on issues of concern, those same discussions fail to leave the confines of the organizational meetings. Members of community organizations are reticent to discuss the issues the organization deems important with their outside friends and neighbors when they are in a public location.

Conversations about public concerns have political consequences (Wyatt et al., 2000). Individuals and communities are perceived as actively seeking to overcome problems and pursue growth through connections to communication resources (Ball-Rokeach, 1998). These assumptions lead me to believe that the lack of communication respondents reported about community level issues may severely impede their efforts to solve community problems. Pearce and Pearce (2000) advanced in their studies of coordinated management of meaning that a certain kind of talk they called ‘public dialogue’ is necessary for residents to become civically engaged. They defined public dialogue as productive public discourse about controversial issues (Pearce & Pearce, 2000). Kim and Ball-Rokeach (2006) extended this research asserting that it is through this type of discourse that community identity is forged, and that community action is encouraged. From the interviews I conducted it appears as if a substantial number of Huntsville residents lack this type of dialogue, and because of that have limited themselves and their community in the manner in which they can address and successfully resolve community issues.

Not only does this lack of diverse storytelling content, which focuses solely on micro-level issues and disregards meso- and macro-level subjects constrain the community’s ability to

address problems, but it also hinders individual's ability to construct knowledge about these problems. Communication infrastructure theory alleges that it is the ecology of communication resources; the mediated, organizational and interpersonal connections, that individuals have that are the resources they use to increase their knowledge base (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2012).

Huntsville residents have few mediated sources dedicated to reporting on their local issues, with the exceptions of the weekly local newspaper and intermittent coverage from regional television stations, which limits their ability to access knowledge building information from this sector of the communication ecology. These shortcomings on top of the limited scope of discussion at the community organization and interpersonal sectors previously discussed add up to a crippling lack of resources from which to build knowledge about issues that should be of concern to everyone in the community.

**Belonging as a constraint.** Respondents felt a sense of belonging to their community and a heartfelt connection to the other residents in it, which created self-imposed restrictions on the storytelling content they shared. Another basic premise of communication infrastructure theory is that community is built on shared discourse about the residential district and its members. This discourse centers on who community members are, their shared experiences, and their desires. It also encompasses their opportunities and issues, and how each should be addressed (Offe, 1980; Tilly, 1978). Communication infrastructure theory acknowledges that connection to communication resources influences civic outcomes and asserts that identifying and encouraging communication assets (e.g. geographic locations that facilitate interpersonal communication) in a community improves civic outcomes like efficacy and active belonging (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006).

Historically, communication infrastructure theory has been studied in urban areas among immigrant populations (Broad et al., 2013; Villanueva et al., 2016; Wilkin et al., 2011) as a way to understand how to foster connection in neighborhoods where residents often feel disconnected. Unlike those previously studied urban areas, Huntsville does not face challenges to facilitating connection among residents in the community. And although access to communication resources may be limited, in actuality, it is the heightened sense of belonging that serves as a psychological constraint on the communication action context. As previously defined, the communication action context, includes physical, psychological, economic, and technological factors that either promote or constrain diverse storytelling. When factors promote storytelling, the communication action context is considered open. When factors constrain storytelling, the communication action context is considered closed. Belonging is one of the psychological factors that can create an open or a closed communication action context (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006). In rural Arkansas the relationships that residents have with one another are so intimate, that in many cases it is moot to discuss issues with each other because “I know how they feel.” Or residents fear alienating those they are close to, thinking “I don’t want to offend them” or even, “I might lose friends” if I talk about things that are of a controversial nature. The fear of damaging relationships creates a closed action context where residents feel unable to discuss issues of community importance even though they may want to share their opinions or hear the opinions of others. So instead of creating space for meso-level discussions as communication infrastructure theory asserts, the high level of integration within the community restricts the content of public discourse to such an extent that the only issues of community concern that can be addressed in public spaces are those that would not be considered controversial.

There are several possible explanations as to why community belonging serves as a constraint on community problem solving, which to date has not been considered in past communication ecology research. Previous studies of communication infrastructure theory have taken place in urban settings like south Los Angeles, with residents that often feel disconnected from their community, have little to no residential tenure, and have little civic engagement (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006; Villanueva et al, 2017; Wilkin et al, 2015) and Atlanta, GA (Wilkin et al., 2011). These are mostly large urban centers where the majority of residents are transient, renting their homes and staying in them for a few years at most before moving on. Residents in these communities create few interpersonal connections and do not develop ties to community organizations which often makes them feel disconnected from their neighborhood, lacking a sense of belonging and social identity. In contrast, Huntsville residents have a strong social identity. They have personal and often familial connections to other residents in their community and participate in multiple community organizations. Kim and Ball-Rokeach (2006) claim that in communities with an integrated storytelling network, people are informed about neighborhood issues and talk about them with each other in a way that encourages participation in community building activities. However, in Huntsville we see a high level of integration among storytelling network participants but a low level of talk about neighborhood issues. Thus, providing another sign that there may be a limit to the level of integration among storytelling agents in healthy communities.

Communities with high levels of residential stability, like Huntsville, maintain strong social ties and feel a greater sense of belonging (Sampson, 1991). Community members have a high level of connectedness. Connectedness according to communication infrastructure theory not only addresses the range and relationship to communication resources but the quality of those

relationships (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006). This intense connectedness as it appears in the Huntsville community seems to be a constraining factor on the communication action context. Ball-Rokeach et al. (2001) posed comfort with one's group as a means of creating an open communication action context, however with Huntsville residents we found that the opposite was true. Residents knew one another so well that they surveilled their own communication in order to avoid conflict and hurt feelings. The maintenance of the personal relationship was more important than discussing issues or problems that might cause the conversation partner discomfort. Posed another way, it was not discomfort with the conversational situation or the conversation partner that was a psychological constraining factor as discussed earlier, but a fear of creating lasting discomfort between conversation partners.

Taken together, the intense feelings of belonging, the high level of integration within the community, and the desire to maintain comfortable relationships, combine to provide a powerful psychological restraining factor which creates a closed communication action context for community members, thus restricting their communicative subject matter to micro-level stories. These findings challenge current assumptions of communication infrastructure theory as it relates to the rural setting of Huntsville, Arkansas. Rural community residents share a history and often times a familial connection with one another that differentiates them from their urban counterparts.

### **Practical Implications**

Communication infrastructure theory is often an applied research. It has been used to increase civic engagement (Broad et al., 2013), improve community resilience (Spialek & Houston, 2019), locate hard-to-reach populations (Wilkin et al., 2011), and measure hurricane preparedness (Kim & Kang, 2010). Successfully applying it to Huntsville and possibly other

rural communities may require a few minor modifications. At a minimum, messages will need to be crafted in specific ways as to conform them to the strict parameters of Huntsville's storytelling network.

First, it is first important to realize that only noncontroversial issues will be able to be successfully addressed. The constraints residents place on their own interpersonal communication will not allow things of a controversial nature to be discussed. Residents reported being supportive of each other in times of crisis, combined with their sense of belonging, this increases the probability of participating in crisis preparedness activities (Kim & Kang, 2009). So crisis management or preparedness topics would be more likely to be discussed at community communication assets. Also, residents demonstrated a community wide tendency to prioritize the youth of the community. Therefore, framing issues around the impact that they will have on children could be a way to address more controversial subject matter and will most likely increase the possibility that it will be included in the storytelling network. Adapting the frame of the message to better fit the community's storytelling dynamics may not change opinions but could potentially alter the importance community members place on the proposed considerations (Lee, Mcleod, & Shah, 2008). Residents who discussed issues stressed that they tried to give information and avoid judgements especially when they felt like they had a more informed perspective and could correct misinformation. Therefore, messages that are perceived as informational and not persuasive will also have a greater probability of being shared in Huntsville's storytelling network. Goenendyk and Velentino (2002) support the notion of relaying information over opinion when talking about community issues, noting that it increases one's perceived credibility.

Another key to successfully using the communication infrastructure of Huntsville is to identify community residents who are willing to discuss more contentious subjects and recruit them as local champions. Certain community members, namely Diane, Phoebe, Karen, and Margaret, reported themselves as people other community members went to for information or direction because of their current position or their past experience. These are also the respondents who reported a desire to correct any false information that they may hear. Research has shown that community leaders are important in the process of disseminating information to local organizations and throughout the community (Keys, Thomsen, & Smith, 2016). Enlisting residents that are already perceived as community leaders to disseminate information regarding important community issues would be a natural extension of their existing behaviors and position within the community.

Finally, community leaders may need to find or create discursive spaces where meso- and macro-level topic discussions are encouraged. This type of discussion will help residents build their knowledge base surrounding meso- and macro-level issues and allow them to become comfortable talking about those issues in public spaces. The built environment of the community can make it more difficult for residents to connect to community organizations or participate in community events (Wilkin, et al., 2011). Therefore, creating truly public spaces like community centers or auditoriums, could change the communication infrastructure in a way that encourages discursive conversation. Events like town hall meetings or open school board meetings where discussion is encouraged could also be ways that alter the existing communication infrastructure. Unlike their urban counterparts, some rural community members live miles from the communication assets (i.e. hot spots and comfort zones) in their community. Therefore, communication action context features like socioeconomic characteristics and geographical

limitations (Kim & Ball-RoKeach, 2006) will need to be addressed to increase the successfulness of the proposed built infrastructure changes. By holding open forum events throughout the area or by increasing the number and varying the times of open forum events, community leaders can weaken socioeconomic limitations by decreasing the expense associated with civic participation. They will also reduce geographical limitations because residents will have the opportunity to participate closer to home or without having to alter their customary schedules.

### **Limitations and Directions Future Research**

Due to time constraints, the narrowness of researching a single rural community, and focusing solely on the interpersonal communication agents, there are a multitude of areas that could be of interest for future research. Respondents were asked about how and when they shared their opinions but were not questioned about how they developed those opinions in the first place. It would be important to know where Huntsville residents get the information they use to build their knowledge base about local and national issues. Especially since it is obvious that they do not rely on their interpersonal storytelling network for information. Storytelling in the communication infrastructure theory framework is only limited by its referent; it has to be about the local (Kim & Ball-RoKeach, 2006). Consequently, it would also be important to look at other storytelling agents in the community and not just the interpersonal/individual storytellers. Looking at the stories addressed by the local newspaper, news stations and even social media would help to create a clearer more concise picture of the community's communication infrastructure. It would also be interesting to learn about the storytelling networks of the minority groups in the Huntsville community. Although the population size of these groups is small, the applicational nature of communication infrastructure theory would be

useful in the same way studying minority groups in urban settings was useful; in increasing belonging, improving access to healthcare, and promoting civic engagement.

## **Conclusion**

Communication infrastructure theory analyzes the neighborhood storytelling network and recognizes communication assets that interlink community members. It identifies those comfort zones and hot spots that integrate a community and provide touch points that encourage public discourse and connection. Communication assets are significantly important in urban areas where community membership is transient, and neighbors share little more than an address. Identifying these locations gives community organizers and others a way to reach often hard to find populations and include them in the decision-making process. In Huntsville however, there is less importance on identifying communication assets, because nearly every public space is considered either a hot spot or comfort zone; but the importance is placed on the communication agents and the stories that they share. Unlike urban community residents who need to rely on their storytelling network to help them build connections and belonging, it could be argued that Huntsville residents are too connected. The long history of family, and the welcoming “wrap you in” spirit that the community exudes leave little room for self-expression and independence of thought. It is this connectedness that constrains the communication action context, limiting the types of stories residents will share and potentially making them unable to constructively address social issues and community problems. This research provides evidence for the need to study more rural communities, like Huntsville, and their respective communication infrastructures to verify the transferability of communication infrastructure theory assumptions that have been developed and proven in urban neighborhoods.

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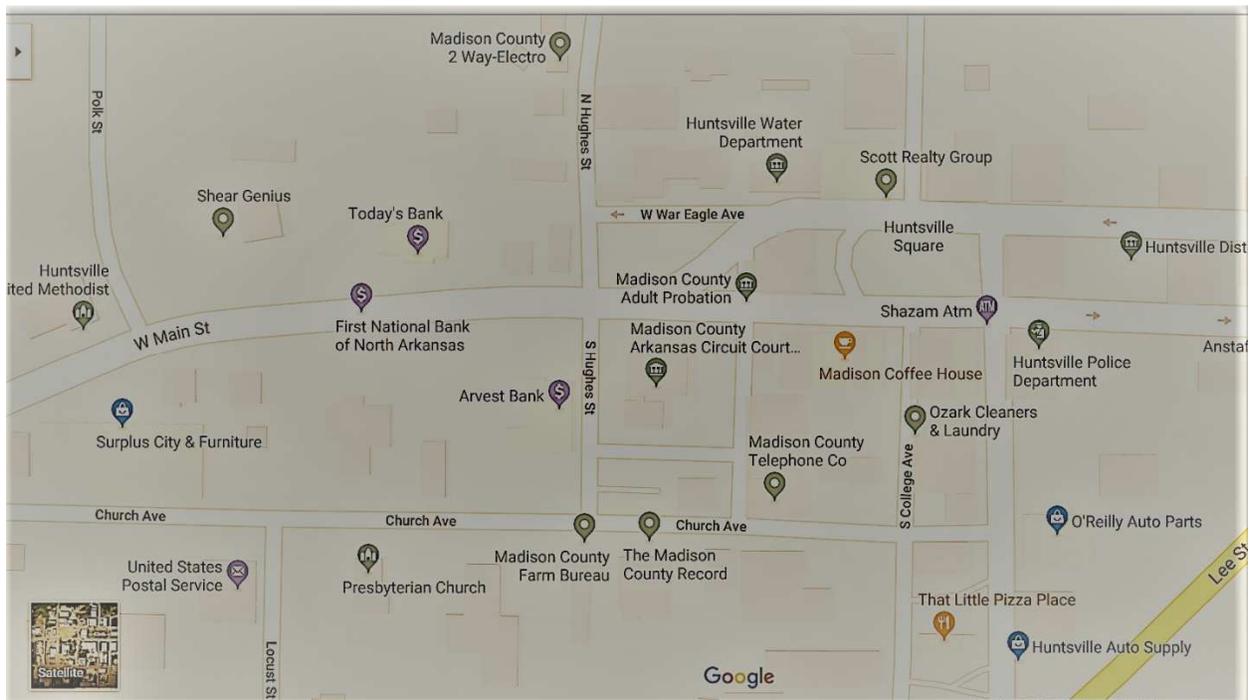
# Appendices

## Appendix A

### Field Instrument

#### Huntsville Downtown

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Time: \_\_\_\_\_



(Google Maps; <https://www.google.com/maps/@36.0872175,-93.7372876,17.63z>)

### Huntsville Shopping Area

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Time: \_\_\_\_\_

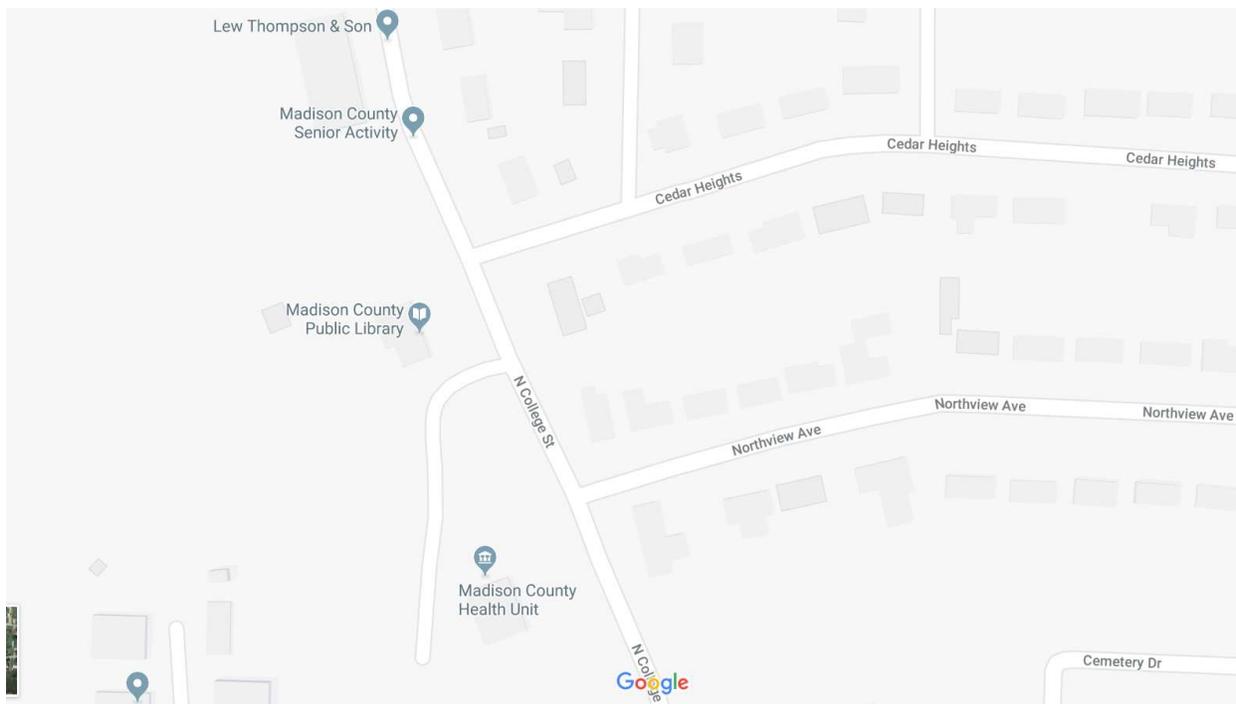


(Google Maps, <https://www.google.com/maps/@36.1143863,-93.7091902,15.54z>)

### Huntsville Sr. Center

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Time: \_\_\_\_\_



(Google Maps, <https://www.google.com/maps/@36.0950361,-93.7379456,17.9z>)

Communication Asset

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Category: \_\_\_\_\_

Description: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Tot. # people: \_\_\_\_\_

Communication Asset

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Category: \_\_\_\_\_

Description: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Tot. # people: \_\_\_\_\_

Communication Asset

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Category: \_\_\_\_\_

Description: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Tot. # people: \_\_\_\_\_

Communication Asset

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Category: \_\_\_\_\_

Description: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Tot. # people: \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix B  
**Mapping Communication Infrastructure  
 Consent to Participate in a Research Study**

Principal Researcher: Callie Embry

This is a research study. Research studies involve only individuals who choose to participate. Please take your time to make your decision.

**WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE RESEARCH STUDY**

*What is the purpose of this research study?*

The purpose of this study is to better understand how local residents share stories in community spaces. You are being asked to participate because you are at least 18 years old and were observed conversing in a public space.

*What am I being asked to do?*

Your participation will require you to participate in a 30 to 60-minute recorded interview about a conversation you were observed having in a public location and your general level of community involvement.

*What are the possible risks or discomforts?*

There are no anticipated risks to participating in this study.

*What are the possible benefits of this study?*

Participants completing the interview will receive no substantial benefit.

*Will I receive compensation for my time if I choose to participate in this study?* There is no compensation for your participation.

*What are my rights as a research participant?*

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time. If you agree to take part and then decide against it, you can withdraw for any reason without penalty.

*How will my confidentiality be protected?*

All information will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by applicable State and Federal law and University policy. All data will be stored on password-protected computers. Your interview responses will be linked to the location and time of your observed public conversation, so they will not include any identifying information. The interview will be audio recorded, then transcribed using a pseudonym instead of your real name. The audiotapes will be destroyed at the end of the study.

*Will I know the results of the study?*

At the conclusion of the study you will have the right to request feedback about the results. You may contact the Principal Researcher, Callie Embry, [csembry@uark.edu](mailto:csembry@uark.edu). You will receive a hard copy of this form for your files before you begin participating in this study.

*What do I do if I have questions about the research study?*

You have the right to contact the Principal Researcher or Faculty Advisor as listed below for any concerns that you may have.

Callie Embry  
 Department of Communication  
 417 Kimpel Hall

Dr. Matthew Spialek,  
 Department of Communication  
 417 Kimpel Hall

**IRB#: 1902175161 APPROVED: 14-Mar-2019 EXP: 19-Feb-2020**

University of Arkansas  
csembry@uark.edu

479-789-5591

University of Arkansas  
mspialek@uark.edu

479-575-5952

You may also contact the University of Arkansas Research Compliance office listed below if you have questions about your rights as a participant, or to discuss any concerns about, or problems with the research.

Ro Windwalker, CIP  
Institutional Review Board Coordinator  
Research Compliance  
University of Arkansas  
109 MLKG Building  
Fayetteville, AR 72701-1201  
479-575-2208  
[irb@uark.edu](mailto:irb@uark.edu)

By signing this form, you are indicating your willingness to participate in this study. You have not given up any of your legal rights or released any institution or individual from liability or negligence. Signing this form means that you have read the above statement and have been able to ask questions and express concerns, which have been satisfactorily responded to by the investigator. Signing this form also indicates that you understand the purpose of the study, the potential benefits and risks that are involved, and that participation is voluntary. Participation in the interview process indicates your consent to be audio recorded. Findings developed during this research will be shared with you at your request. Finally, you have been given a copy of the consent form. Thank you for your assistance in this research project. Your participation is greatly appreciated.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Print Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**IRB#: 1902175161 APPROVED: 14-Mar-2019 EXP: 19-Feb-2020**

## Appendix C

**Communication Infrastructure Theory: A Rural Perspective****Semi-structured Interview Guide**

\*This is a semi-structured interview guide. These are sample questions that I will likely ask.

RQ<sub>1</sub>: What are the kinds of stories residents share at communication assets in their community?

1. What is your relationship to the person you were visiting with?
2. To the best of your memory, what were the topics that you discussed?
3. When you meet friends out in public what do you talk about most often?
4. Are there things that you would avoid talking about when you meet a neighbor/friend in public? If so, why?
5. Describe some of the memorable conversations you have had at [insert communication asset].

RQ<sub>3a</sub>: What communication assets exist in rural communities?

b: What communication assets exist in urban communities?

5. What was your reason for being at [insert communication asset]? (What if we change this to “What are some of the reasons you go to this [communication asset]? There could be many reasons that we wouldn’t be able to know if we only ask about that one particular time. Thoughts?)
6. How often do you “visit” with your neighbors/friends at that location?
7. Describe how you feel when you are at this [insert communication asset].
8. Describe how you feel after leaving this [insert communication asset].

9. What other locations do you find yourself visiting with neighbors/friends? What are your reasons for going to these locations?
10. Do you generally make plans to meet people at those locations or do you just run into people while you are there?
11. How would you describe your community?
12. How long have you lived here?
13. What groups or organizations do you belong to?
14. Is there anything else you would like to add before we end the interview?

## Appendix D

## Data Tables

Table 1

*Demographics of Interview Participants*

Name	Gender	Age (yrs.)	Residential Tenure (yrs.)	Miles From Town	Occupation
Clark	M	80's	life	0	retired
Emily	F	20's	life	0	student
Connor	M	20's	life	0	student
Carol	F	60's	14	0	teacher
Samantha	F	50's	30+	2	manager
Taylor	M	40's	life	0	blogger
Diane	F	60's	45	0	retired
Gayle	F	20's	15	0	nurse
Carolyn	F	50's	40+	8	domestic
Kathy	F	40's	life	15	cashier
Martha	F	70's	life	10	farmer
Karen	F	50's	life	8	administrator
Kelly	F	40's	14	11	homemaker
Chip	F	50's	14	11	professional
Bobbi	F	70's	9	14	retired
Nettie	F	80's	life	0	retired
Phoebe	F	40's	18	0	teacher
Margaret	F	60's	life	2	city employee
Fiona	F	60's	life	8	hairdresser
Janet	F	50's	35	10	business owner

*Note.* yrs.= years.

Table 2

*Observation Locations and Times*

Location	Day of Week	Time of Day
Downtown Square	Monday	1:00pm- 2:00pm
Wal-Mart	Saturday	6:00pm- 7:30pm
McDonalds	Wednesday	8:20am- 9:00am
Restaurant	Thursday	6:30am-7:30am
Walking Trail	Tuesday	5:30pm- 6:15pm

*Note.* All observations were completed in late March to early April. Each mapping area is represented by at least one location.

## Appendix E




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**To:** Callie S Embry  
**From:** Douglas James Adams, Chair  
 IRB Committee  
**Date:** 03/14/2019  
**Action:** **Expedited Approval**  
**Action Date:** 03/14/2019  
**Protocol #:** 1902175161  
**Study Title:** Communication Infrastructure Theory: a Rural Perspective  
**Expiration Date:** 02/19/2020  
**Last Approval Date:**

The above-referenced protocol has been approved following expedited review by the IRB Committee that oversees research with human subjects.

If the research involves collaboration with another institution then the research cannot commence until the Committee receives written notification of approval from the collaborating institution's IRB.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without Committee approval. Please submit continuation requests early enough to allow sufficient time for review. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in the automatic suspension of the approval of this protocol. Information collected following suspension is unapproved research and cannot be reported or published as research data. If you do not wish continued approval, please notify the Committee of the study closure.

**Adverse Events:** Any serious or unexpected adverse event must be reported to the IRB Committee within 48 hours. All other adverse events should be reported within 10 working days.

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, study personnel, or number of participants, please submit an amendment to the IRB. All changes must be approved by the IRB Committee before they can be initiated.

You must maintain a research file for at least 3 years after completion of the study. This file should include all correspondence with the IRB Committee, original signed consent forms, and study data.

cc: Matthew L Spialek, Investigator